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ABSTRACT

Twenty-eight mother-child pairs -- 14 single parent mothers and their preschool children and a matched group of married women and their children -- were observed in order to investigate four questions concerning potential differences in the mother-child interactions, life circumstances, and social supports. These questions are (1) Do mother-child interaction behaviors differ in single parent and two-parent homes? (2) Do single parents face more stresses and life changes and have fewer social supports and community ties than do married mothers? (3) Do single parents differ from married women in how well they cope with the stresses and responsibilities in their lives? and (4) How do external stresses, life circumstances and social supports affect the functioning of single and married mothers? Results are discussed. Further, implications of the results for theoretical descriptions of the effect of social networks and maternal adjustment on child development are considered, as are implications for intervention. (Author/RH)

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Effects of Stress and Social Supports On Mother-Child Interactions In Single and Two-Parent Families

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Abstract

Twenty-eight mother-child pairs—14 single parent mothers and their preschool children and a matched group of married women and their children--were observed in a mother-child interaction situation. Measures of maternal control, maternal maturity demands, maternal nurturance, mother-child communication, and the child's compliance with maternal demands were obtained. In addition, questionnaires were used to obtain measures of the nature and extent of the mothers' social network, coping abilities, and life stress. No significant differences were found in any of the five mother-child interaction variables. Single parents tended to be more socially isolated than married parents. They worked longer hours and received less emotional support as well as less support in their role as parents. They tended to have less stable social networks and experience more potentially stressful life changes. However, only in the area of household responsibilities did single mothers report more difficulties in coping with daily pressures than two-parent mothers. Different variables predicted optimal mother-child variables in the two samples. Variables predicting optimal mother-child interaction in single parent families were reduced social contact, increased parenting support, and fewer stressful life events. In two parent families, variables predicting optimal mother-child interaction were satisfaction with emotional support and extent to which regular help was available for household chores. Social contacts, perception of emotional support, extent of help with household chores, and employment differentially predicted mother-child interactions in the two groups. Implications of these differences for theoretical descriptions of the effect of social networks and maternal adjustment on child development are considered, as are implications for intervention.

Effects of Stress and Social Supports on Mother-Child Interactions in Single and Two-Parent Families.

One of the most dramatic changes over the last decade in the composition of family units is the increasing number of female-headed families. In 1970 there were 234,000 single parent families (women never married with children under 18 years); by 1979 single parent families increased to 902,000, representing a near quadrupling of the phenomenon (Rawlings, 1980). This change in family composition exceeds the percentage of change attributable to divorce and seems to reflect increasing births to single mothers. From 1970 to 1979, the number of births to single women increased more than 36% (from 398,700 in 1970 to 543,900 in 1978). Births to white single women accounted for 5.7% of all white births in 1970 and 8.7% of all white births in 1978. Births to black single women represented 34.9% of all black births in 1970 and 47.5% of all black births in 1978. Moreover, the change in birth rate to single women is most pronounced, not for adolescents, but for women between the ages of 25 and 29, where single parent births have increased by 72.4% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980).

Evidence regarding the effects of father absence has suggested that children of single mother families may be at greater developmental risk than children of two-parent families. Growing up without a father may have direct and indirect effects on the child's cognitive, social and personality development. Direct effects include those relating to reduced stimulation resulting from father absence (e.g., Biller, 1982; Park, 1979) and possible differences in the personality characteristics between married and single women who choose to rear a child (Porter, 1979). Indirect effects of father absence include those affecting the mother's emotional and economic adjustment and her

interactions with her child which may result from the increased life changes and economic and social stresses common to single parent families (Weiss, 1979). External stressors and frequent life changes have been associated with poorer mother-child attachments (Vaughn, Egeland & Sroufe, 1979) and place the child at increased risk for emotional and intellectual problems (Eiduson, 1981).

In addition, there are questions about the functioning of single parent families that go beyond questions of father absence. Theoretically, studies of single parent families can yield information about how differing family systems affect child development and how the functioning of differing family systems is influenced by interactions with the larger community. Cochran and Broussard's (1979) recent theoretical work on the potential impact of social networks suggest the importance of viewing the child and his/her family within a larger social context. Their work suggests that community ties may directly influence a child through his or her contacts with other adults and children, and indirectly by the sanctions, and practical and emotional supports available to the parents. Studies of two-parent families are beginning to document the effects of social supports on mother-child interactions (see, for example, Crockenberg, 1981). It is possible, however, that the effects of social networks differ as a function of family constellation. Investigating the differential effects of social network variables in single and two parent families will expand our understanding of the effects of social context on child development, and may also be of practical use in designing and implementing social policy relevant to the increasing number of single parent families.

In this study, we focused on four questions concerning potential differences in the mother-child interactions, life circumstances and social supports in single and two-parent families with young children. These questions are:

1) Do mother-child interactions behaviors differ in single parent and two-parent homes?
2) Do single parents face more stresses and life changes and have fewer social supports and community ties than do married mothers?
3) Do single parents differ from married women in how well they cope with the stresses and responsibilities in their lives?
4) How do external stresses, life circumstances and social supports affect the functioning of single and married mothers? In particular, do these factors differentially influence the ability of single and married mothers to function effectively as parents?

Many studies of single parents have confounded one-parent status with the effects of divorce and/or separation. In this study, all of the single mothers were separated from the child's father for longer than 18 months. For the most part, the children were raised with no father present in the home. Thus, the results of this study have theoretical implications for understanding one vs. two parent families and offer practical information for the growing number of women choosing to raise children without the presence of a second parent.

Method

Participants

The total sample of 28 mother-child pairs consisted of 14 single parent mothers and their preschool children and a matched group of married women and their children. Single parents were defined as parents who had been raising their child since birth, or, in most cases, since shortly after the child's birth without the presence of a male partner. Forty-three percent of the single parents were women who actively chose to rear their children without a husband. The remainder of the single parents were divorced or separated from their

husbands prior to or shortly after to the birth of their child.[1]

The children in the study included 16 girls and 12 boys. They ranged from twenty-seven to fifty-four months of age. All of the children were first-borns except for two girls in the single family sample.

Single parent mothers were recruited from posters in health clinics, day care centers and women centers, and from advertisements placed in local newspapers and in newsletters of single parent organizations. In finding a matched sample of children from two parent homes, the pediatricians and day care centers used by the single parents were first contacted and asked to recommend two parent families with children of similar age, sex and birth order as the single parent family. If they were unable to recommend an appropriate match, then matches for the single parent children were made by contacting mothers who had responded to ads placed in local newspapers or from mothers engaged in childbirth classes at a local hospital. Only mothers 23 years of age and older were selected for the study. Because of the limited number of black respondents to the ads, only white women and their children were included in the final sample. One boy and one girl in the single parent sample, however, had black fathers.

The single and two parent families were matched on a number of dimensions. Attempts were made to match all children by sex, age, and birth order in the family. Except for three pairs, all children seen in the laboratory were less than a month and a half different in age from their match. Two of the matches with two-and-a-half-year-olds differed by three months in age. Another match between four-year-old children differed by four months in age. A matched t-test indicated no significant difference in the ages of matched children. All but two of the pairs were matched in terms of their birth order within the family.

After matching mother-child pairs on the basis of child characteristics, attempts were made to match on a number of maternal characteristics. Despite strenuous attempts to match the single and married mothers on employment status, a matched t-test indicated significant differences between single and married women in the number of hours worked per week (34 versus 16.5 hours, $t = 4.01$, $p < .01$). As could be expected, single parents (in all but one case) worked more than their married counterparts. In our sample, all single parents worked at least 12 hours per week and ten of the fourteen worked full time. In contrast, only three married women worked full time, and five of the fourteen other married women worked for eight or fewer hours per week. The difference between married and single women in employment seems to realistically reflect the employment status of these groups of women in our society, and are consistent with Eiduson's (1981) observations in a study of non-traditional families.

Mothers in single and two-parent families were closely matched on maternal age, maternal educational levels, and family per capita income. Although the per person income for single parent households appeared on the average less than the per person income of two-parent households ($7,821 vs. $9,621), this difference was not statistically significant. As a whole the sample tended to include generally older and well educated women. The mean age of all women in the sample was 32 years, and the average amount of schooling was 16 years. Three of the women in the sample had high school degrees, 14 had two or more years of college, and 11 had post-college training.

Measures

Mother-Child Interaction. A structured laboratory task was used to assess the quality and frequency of mother-child interactions. The task, modified from one used by Diana Baumrind (1967), was used to measure maternal control, maternal maturity demands, maternal nurturance, mother-child

communication, and the child's compliance with maternal demands.

The experimenter, a female graduate student in clinical psychology, introduced the task by demonstrating a number of labelling, categorization and sequencing activities with cuisinaire rods that were appropriate to the child's age. These activities involved the exploration of concepts of size, shape, and color for younger children, and for older children, the concept of number. The mother was instructed to choose some activity or activities with the rods that would be an appropriate and engaging learning experience for her child.

In addition to the rods, a number of interesting and distracting toys were placed in the room, opposite from the mother and child. The mother was asked to keep her child from playing with these toys. After ten minutes of activity with the cuisinaire rods, the mother and child were signalled to clean up—i.e., put the cuisinaire rods back in their box. Up to four minutes was allotted for clean-up.

Each mother-child interaction episode was videotaped and later scored by BMW (a graduate student in clinical psychology) using a five-point rating scale adapted from Baumrind. The revised scale yielded summary scores based on from 4 to 9 items in the areas of maternal control, maternal maturity demands, maternal nurturance, mother-child communication and the child's compliance with maternal demands.

Maternal control included items measuring the extent of the mother's attempts and effectiveness in having her child conform to the rules of the task and the extent to which she gave effective directions for the cuisinaire rod activites. Maternal maturity demands tapped the extent of the mother's demands on her child, given the child's age, to perform intellectually and to act maturely and independently. Maternal nurturance rated the mother's responsiveness to the child's frustration level, interests and ac tivities, and

physical needs as well as her displays of affection and absence of displays of hostility to the child. Mother-child communication tapped the ease and spontaneity of the mother's verbal and non-verbal communications and the extent to which the mother acknowledged either verbally or non-verbally her child's communications. The child's compliance with maternal demands tapped the degree to which the child responded easily and freely to the mother's requests and to her introduction of activities with the rods, as well as the degree to which the child was actively oppositional or inattentive during the instructional period.

Alpha coefficients among the individual items making up the five summary scores ranged from .72 to .93, indicating generally good internal consistency of items in each total scoring category. Interrater reliability estimates were obtained having BMW and a second rater independently code six tapes. Correlations between raters for summary scores across each of the categories were as follows: maternal control: .98, maternal maturity demands: .75, and mother-child communication: .64, maternal nurturance: .93, and child's response to maternal demands: .97.

Baumrind's findings with the original rating instrument suggest that, despite the artificiality of the laboratory task, the cuisinaire rod task is a valid measure of mother-child interactions. In her research with this measure, she found that observers' ratings of maternal behaviors correlated highly with ratings of behaviors in the home setting and measures of preschool children's social competence.

Social Network Form (SNF). The Social Network Form is a questionnaire concerning the nature and extent of social supports available to a mother designed by BMW with the help of MW and Dr. Sally Haimo. Several of the questions on the questionnaire were modified from a social network form developed by Gladieux (1978).

The questionnaire covers five basic areas: 1) social contacts, 2) emotional supports, 3) supports for parenting concerns, 4) practical help with childcare and with household tasks, and 5) satisfaction with the supports received. The questionnaire asks respondents to list the four friends and relatives[2] they see most frequently. The respondent is then asked to rate or comment upon the extent to which her relationships with these four people are intimate, supportive, and helpful. Questions on the form involve both ratings and free responses. While many of the questions asks for information about the mother's relationship with the four people initially listed, several questions are broader, allowing the mother to consider other people in her social network.

Five summary scores were obtained from multiple questions on the scale. Total social contacts was a measure of the frequency of monthly social contacts a mother had with the individuals she saw most frequently. This total score included contacts with each person individually, in a group or by telephone or letter. Emotional supports included ratings of how much the mother confided in and obtained emotional support from each of these four people, as well as from her membership in parenting groups and other organizations (e.g., church, woman's groups, therapy groups, etc.). Parenting supports included measures of the mother's rating of the extent to which she valued the parenting beliefs of the four friends and relatives she saw most frequently, and the extent to which she felt she received support in her role as a parent from parenting groups and organizations to which she belonged. Measures of practical help with childcare and with household chores were each summary scores based on the total number of weekly hours of help the mother obtained from family, friends, or paid help in each of these areas. The mother's satisfaction with the support she received emotionally and as a parent each involved a rating of the extent to which the mother considered the support she received in each of these two areas to be

sufficient.

Alpha coefficients were computed in order to determine the internal consistency of individual items making up the summary scores of total social contacts, emotional support, parenting support and help with childcare and household responsibilities. These alpha coefficients ranged from .65 to .95, indicating acceptable cohesiveness of items making up the different summary scores.

Test-retest reliability of the SNF was calculated using ten female graduate students or wives of graduate students, all of whom were also parents. The SNF was administered to each of these mothers twice over a two to three week period. Acceptable test-retest reliabilities for the SNF were obtained with the graduate student sample. On the second testing the students listed a mean of 3.6 of the same 4 people listed on the initial form. The correlations between individual items and summary score items also proved to be generally good. Test-retest correlations for the summary scores were .67 for Total Social Contacts, .89 for Emotional Support, .44 for Parenting Support, .98 for Household Help and .91 for Child Care Help. The lower correlation for Parenting Support seemed to be due to one graduate student's confusion over questions relating to parenting support. On the retest she explicitly stated that she interpreted the questions differently and more idiosyncratically than she had on the first test.

Maternal Coping. Measures of the mother's perception of her ability to cope in five different areas were also obtained. On a five point scale, mothers rated their ability to cope with 1) household responsibilities, 2) childcare responsibilities, 3) finances, and 4) emotions. In addition, each mother also rated her sense of overall ability to cope. The scale ranged form 0 (rarely in control) through 3 (usually in control) to 5 (almost always in control).

The ten graduate student mothers were also administered this scale as a means of determining the consistency of responses to this rating method. Test-retest reliabilities over a two to three week period for each measure were: household responsibilities, .87; child care responsibilities, .51; finances, .67; emotions, .61; and overall ratings of coping, .67.

Stress. A modified version of the Holmes and Rahe (1967) Social Readjustment Scale was used as a measure of stress. This modified 53 item checklist simply asks each mother to check off which potentially stressful events have happened to her in the 12 month period preceding her participation in the study. A total score on the measure was obtained by adding the number of items checked.

Data Analysis

Matched t-tests were used to explore differences in parenting and child behaviors, social supports, maternal coping and stress between single and married mothers. Matched t-tests comparing pairs of single parent and two parent families were used to hold constant as much as possible child and family variables other than those related to the single parent situation.

To examine the impact of social supports and stresses on mother-child interactions and parenting attitudes, correlations between these variables were obtained. Because of the matched nature of the sample, the data from single and two parent families are not analyzed together. Separate correlations for single and married women between these measures are reported.

Finally, to examine the differential impact of social supports, satisfaction with support and life stresses on mother-child interactions, differences between the correlations obtained within each group were analyzed using t-tests.

Two-tailed tests were used. Only results significant at the .05 level

are reported, except where noted.

Results

Mean Differences between Single and Two-parent Families

Mother-Child Interaction Scores

Insert Table 1 about here

Presented in Table 1 are mean scores for single and married mothers and differences between the two groups as measured by matched t-tests on the five mother-child interaction measures.

As indicated by the table, no significant differences were found on any of the five parenting variables: maternal control, maternal maturity demands, mother-child communication, maternal nurturance, and the child's compliance with maternal demands.

Life Circumstances: Social Network and Life Stresses

Insert Table 2 about here

In Table 2 are summarized the mean scores for single and married mothers and differences in these scores obtained from matched t-tests on social network variables, maternal coping ratings and life changes scores.

Social Contacts. The frequency of social contacts for single mothers tended to be less than for married women ($t=1.38$, $p \leq .10$). It is likely, however, that this difference might be even larger than obtained. Five of the married women tested early in the study did not include their husbands among the four people seem most often. Yet, except for one married woman with significant marital conflicts, the husbands were seen quite frequently. Thus, the frequency

of social contacts for married women may underestimate the true frequency of their contacts with others.

Emotional Support. There were differences in single and married parents' ratings of the emotional support they received from people they saw most frequently ($t=3.47$, $p \leq .01$). Single parents were less likely to confide in the friends and relatives they saw most frequently ($t=1.81$, $p \leq .05$). Additionally, there was a trend for single mothers to rate their friends and relatives as less emotionally supportive than the married mothers ($t=1.70$, $p \leq .10$). Again, several married women did not list their husband as one of the people seen most frequently, so that their ratings of support did not include their mate. Yet, in open-ended questions, some of these same women did indicate that their husband was a significant source of emotional and parenting support. These observations suggest that the indicated trend may be even more powerful than indicated in our findings.

Single parents also reported less emotional support from parenting groups and organizations and other affiliations (church, social groups, etc.) than did the married women ($t=2.05$, $p \leq .05$). It appeared more likely for married women to join formal organizations and parenting groups than single parents. Nine married women, and six single women belonged to organizations; seven married women, but only one single parent belonged to a parenting group.

When all possible sources of support (friends, relatives, groups and organizations) were examined together, the single parents' report of the support they received was substantially less than the married women's ($t = 3.47$, $p < .01$). Despite these significant and consistent differences between the single and married mothers, there were no significant differences in their on their levels of satisfaction with the amount of emotional support they received ($t = .64$, $p = .27$).

Parenting Support. As with emotional support, single women also reported less support in their parenting roles than did the married women ($t = 2.95$, $p \leq .01$). Single parents stated that they valued the beliefs of the four people they saw significantly less than their married matches ($t=1.79$, $p \leq .05$), and that they received less support from parenting and other organizations in their roles as parents ($t=2.87$, $p \leq .01$). Single parents also rated themselves as less satisfied with the support received for their role as parents than did the married women ($t=1.96$, $p \leq .05$).

Practical help. In the amount of practical help received for household and childcare responsibilities, the single parents were not at a disadvantage when compared to married women. The single parents did not differ significantly from married women in the amount of regular household help or help available on an emergency basis for household and childcare chores. However, in terms of regular help with childcare, the single parents reported that they received nearly twice as many hours of help with childcare as the married women ($t=4.63$, $p \leq .01$).

Stability of the social network. The social network of the single parents also differed from the married women's in tending to be less stable or consistent over time. In filling out a second SNF after a 3 to 6 month interval since their visit to the lab, single parents listed fewer of the same people on the form than did the married women (one tailed probability, $p < .05$).

Maternal Coping. Because single women, unlike married women, face the responsibilities of finances, childcare and household singlehandedly, it was hypothesized that they would report more difficulties in coping in all areas of their lives. In all five of the areas measured—household, childcare, finances, emotional and overall—the mean ratings for the single parents was less than for the married women. However, only in the area of household responsibilities was

the single parents' report of their ability to cope significantly less than their married matches ($t = 1.88$, $p \leq .05$).

Stress and life events. It had been hypothesized that, because of their active involvement in both the worlds of work and the home, single parents would face more pressures and possibly more potentially stressful life changes than their married counterparts. On the modified Holmes and Rahe Social Inventory, the average single parent reported 9.4 out of 53 life changes in a year, while the average married mother reported only 6.6. While this result only approaches significance ($p = .057$) the trend seems important to note.[3]

In addition to the tendency for single parents to experience more potentially stressful life changes, the nature of the life events that are experienced by the two groups tended to differ. The pressures faced by married women seemed to center around their home and family. The most significant life events for 5 out of the 14 married women was the pregnancy or the birth of a new child. In addition, 8 of the married women also faced with their husbands the pressures of meeting a mortgage of over $10,000. For single women, stresses centered around changes in employment or responsibilities, conditions or hours of work. Two-thirds of our sample of single women (compared to only one married woman) reported a change to a new line of work or to a new position with their previous employer. In addition, single women ($n = 5$) tended to report more changes in residence or living conditions than did their married matches ($n = 2$). Single parents tended to report more changes in areas having to do with personal goals, social activities and personal habits. While three of the married women reported changes in their life goals during the last year, six (almost half) of the single women reported a shift in their life goals. These findings, along with the finding that single parents listed more changes in their SNF over a three to six month period, indicate that for many single

mothers the nature of their daily lives at work, home, and in social settings may be in greater flux than for married women.

Relationships of social network stress and employment variable to mother-child interaction measures.

The mother's interactions with her child were correlated with the extent of her social contacts, emotional support, parenting support, practical support for household and childcare, satisfaction with the supports, life stress and hours employment. The correlations are reported separately for each sample, as combining samples was inappropriate due to the matching of subjects. Correlations for single and married women and the difference in correlations between the two groups are summarized in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

Single mothers:

Social contacts. For single parents in our study, total social contacts were significantly correlated with a number of parenting variables, yet not in the predicted directions. More frequent monthly social contacts was correlated with lower maternal nurturance ($r = -.61$, $p \leq .01$) and with less child compliance to maternal demands and requests ($r = -.61$, $p \leq .01$). There were trends for frequent social contacts to be associated with less maternal control ($r = -.40$, $p \leq .10$) and with less optimal mother-child communication ($r = -.37$, $p \leq .10$).

Emotional supports. Total emotional support and ratings of satisfaction with this support was not significantly correlated with any of the observed maternal behaviors.

Parenting support. The extent of single parents' supports as parents and their satisfaction with these supports was correlated with measures of

optimal parenting. Total parenting support was positively correlated with maternal control ($r = .54$, $p < .05$), maternal maturity demands ($r = .47$, $p < .05$) and child compliance ($r = .59$, $p < .05$). There was a tendency for parenting support to correlate with maternal nurturance ($r = .37$, $p < .10$). The satisfaction of the single parent with her parenting supports was positively correlated with mother-child communication ($r = .62$, $p < .01$) and with maternal nurturance ($r = .64$, $p < .01$). For single parents then, while higher total parenting support related to improved control over their child, perceived adequacy of this support related to maternal nurturance and responsivity.

Practical help. The extent of help available for household chores or child care was not significantly related to any of the measures of single parenting behavior.

Stress. More potentially stressful life events were associated with reduced maternal nurturance ($r = -.49$, $p < .05$). Life changes tended to be associated with less positive parent-child communication ($r = -.42$, $p < .10$).

Maternal employment. Hours of employment for single women was positively correlated with maternal control ($r = .52$, $p < .05$), maturity demands ($r = .48$, $p < .05$) and child compliance ($r = .50$, $p < .05$). These correlations suggest that when single parents are faced with sole responsibility for financial support, childcare and household chores, they exert greater control and expect more mature behavior from their children.

Married Mothers:

Social contacts. For married mothers, no significant correlations were found between the number of monthly social contacts and any of the five mother-child interaction measures.

Emotional support. For married mothers, total emotional support was not significantly correlated with any of the mother-child interaction variables.

However, satisfaction with emotional support tended to be related to a number of parenting measures. Satisfaction with emotional support was significantly and positively correlated with maternal control ($r = .49$, $p \leq .05$) and mother-child communication ($r = .69$, $p \leq .01$).

Parenting support. Total parenting support and satisfaction with this support was not strongly correlated with the married women's interactions. Total parenting support was correlated only with maternal nurturance ($r = .55$, $p \leq .05$).

Practical help. The extent of regular help available for household chores was found to be signficantly and positively related to a great number of parenting variables for the married mothers. For married women the number of hours of household help available was positively correlated with maternal control ($r = .54$, $p \leq .05$), parent-child communication ($r = .58$, $p \leq .05$), maternal nurturance ($r = .58$, $p \leq .05$), and the child's response to parental demands ($r = .53$, $p \leq .05$). In addition, household help tended to be negatively related to maternal maturity demands ($r = -.37$, $p \leq .10$).

Stress. While the number of potentially stressful life changes was significantly correlated for single parents with decreased nurturance in childrearing, life changes only tended to be correlated with nurturance for married mothers ($r = -.42$, $p \leq .10$).

Employment. The number of hours worked by married women was related to lessened maternal control ($r = -.49$, $p \leq .05$) and tended to be related to more limited maturity demands placed upon the child ($r = -.42$, $p \leq .10$).

Comparison of Correlations in Single and Two-parent Family Groups

Because only 8 of the 45 comparisons (18%) of the correlation coefficients were significantly different in the two samples, these results should be interpreted with caution.

Social Contacts. Correlations between social contacts and maternal nurturance and between social contacts and the child's response to maternal demands differed for single and two-parent mothers ($t = 2.47$ and $t = 1.99$ respectively). For single parents, increased social contacts were associated with less maternal nurturance ($r = -.61$, $p \leq .01$) and less child compliance ($r = -.61$, $p \leq .01$). This was not the case for married parents.

Emotional Supports. The relation between total emotional supports and mother-child interaction variables did not differ significantly between the single and married groups of women.

The relationships between satisfaction with emotional support and maternal control ($t = 1.76$, $p \leq .10$), maternal maturity demands ($t = 1.55$, $p \leq .10$) and mother-child communication ($t = 1.73$, $p \leq .10$) tended to be different in the two groups. Married women who were satisfied with their emotional supports were more controlling with their children ($r = .49$, $p \leq .05$) and communicated better ($r = .69$, $p \leq .01$), while for single parents, these variables were not significantly correlated.

Practical help. For both groups of women, childcare help was not correlated with any of the parenting variables. However, the relation between household help and parenting variables differed between the single and married mothers. Household help for married women was consistently positively correlated with more effective mothering but was negatively and non-significantly correlated for the single mothers. These differences proved significant between the two groups in the areas of maternal control ($t = 2.14$, $p \leq .05$), maternal nurturance ($t = 2.00$, $p \leq .05$), and the child's compliance with maternal demands ($t = 2.43$, $p \leq .05$). The relation between household help and mother-child communication tended toward a difference in the two groups ($t = 1.86$, $p \leq .10$). These findings indicate that for married women increased

help with household chores has a significantly greater impact on parent-child relationships than among single mothers.

Stress. There were no differences between single and married women in the impact of potentially stressful life changes on their parenting behaviors.

Employment. There were differences in the two groups in the relation between hours of employment and maternal and child behaviors. These differences were significant in the correlations of employment with maternal control ($t = 2.58$, $p \leq .01$), maternal maturity demands ($t = 2.27$, $p \leq .05$) and the child's compliance with these demands ($t = 2.09$, $p \leq .01$). For single parents, increased hours of employment was associated with increased control and maturity demands on her child, along with more compliance with these demands from the child. In contrast, for married women increased work hours tended to be correlated with lessened control and fewer demands.

Discussion

The findings with our sample of 28 mothers and children suggest the following tentative answers to the four questions initially raised about the functioning of single and two parent families.

1) Do mother-child interactions and parenting behaviors differ in single and two-parent homes?

When single and two parent families are matched on a number of child, maternal and income variables, there are no significant differences observed in mother-child interactions in the two groups. The single parents in our study fared no better or worse than their married counterparts in their ability to exercise effective control over their children, in their display of maternal nurturance, in their ease in communicating with their children or in the extent of the maturity demands placed upon their children. There were no differences among the children from single or married homes in compliance with their

parents' demands.

2) Do single parents have fewer social supports than do married mothers, and do they face more stresses and life changes?

Compared to married mothers, single parents work longer hours and tend to face more stressful life changes. In addition, they are slightly more isolated, less consistent in their social contacts, less involved in organizations and parenting groups, less supported emotionally and receive less support in their role as parent. For the child in the single parent household, this means that he/she is likely to spend a greater number of hours in alternative child care arrangements away from his mother. In addition, this suggests that at home the child may have less frequent and less consistent contacts with adults than the child in a two parent household. The frequent and potentially stressful changes occurring in single mother's life in work, housing and social concerns may directly affect the child through the changes in his/her living arrangement, schedule, and time with his/her mother.

Overall, what stands out most as differences in lives of single and married mothers is the increased pressures faced singlehandedly by single mothers. Given her increased work load, the single parent has only limited time available to her to handle the demands of child care and household responsibilities. Additionally, she lacks the social contact and practical and emotional supports within her own home that might be available to a married woman in a stable marriage.

3) Do single parents differ from married women in how well they cope with the stresses and responsibilities in their lives?

Despite substantial pressures and lesser supports than married mothers, single mothers generally reported no differences in how well they cope with the reponsibilities in their lives. Only in the area of handling household chores

did single mothers report more difficulty than do married mothers. Given the time pressures and multiple responsibilities faced by single mothers, household chores may be the most easily neglected of the single parent's multiple responsibilities.

4) How do external stresses, life circumstances and social supports affect the functioning of single and married mothers? In particular, do these factors differentially influence the ability of single and married mothers to function effectively as parents?

There were similarities in the effects of the mother's life circumstances and social supports on her interactions with her child. For both single and married mothers, emotional and/or parenting supports and satisfaction with these supports were variables closely related to more positive mother-child interactions. For single parents in our sample, parenting supports and satisfaction with these supports were highly correlated with parenting behaviors. For married women, satisfaction with emotional supports was more frequently correlated with the same parenting measures. In addition, potentially stressful life events tended to correlate with reduced maternal nurturance in both single and two parent families. These findings corroborate Cochran and Brossard's hypotheses regarding the role of social supports in indirectly affecting child development through more direct effects on characteristics of the mother-child interaction.

However, there were three variables--number of social contacts, help with household chores, and hours of employment--which differentially predicted mother-child interactions in the single and two parent families. Contrary to predictions, increased social contacts in the single parent families correlated with reduced maternal nurturance and lower maternal control, lesser maturity demands, and less adequate communication. Part of the explanation for this

unexpected finding may be in the fact that few of our single mothers could be considered truly socially isolated. Another part of the explanation can be understood by considering the nature of our single mothers' lives.

In our sample, women with large number of social contacts were of two types. One type is represented by a young divorced woman who moved back with her family for financial reasons. These frequent social contacts were often stressful, with parents and siblings frequently criticizing the mother's childrearing methods. The difficulties that this mother had, despite her high level of social contacts, is in line with Minturn and Lambert's (1964) observation that close proximity with kin and sanctions against the mother's childrearing practices can result in more parenting problems.

More commonly, the single parents in our study who had more than the median number of social contacts were women who lived alone with their children and who had to seek social contacts outside the home. Since single parents had very few friends with children, their social time often had to be spent separate from their time with their children. These women faced a dilemma: they worked long hours, and they had only a limited amount of time to divide between meeting their own emotional and recreational needs and those of their children. Choosing to spend too much of that limited and precious time with the child would leave the single parent feeling lonely, isolated, and frustrated and perhaps increase her irritability toward the child. Choosing to spend too much of that time with her friends at the expense of her child would leave the single parent less attuned to her child's needs and therefore less responsive to them. In addition, the child whose mother is both working and engaged in frequent outside activities may be more demanding of his/her mother's attention when she is at home, and possibly more resistant to meeting her demands. The single parent seeking support and emotional contacts outside the home, may, therefore,

face more difficult and less gratifying experiences with her child. It is not too surprising, then, that increased social contacts are correlated with less effective mother-child interaction in single-parent families.

The situation of the single mother contrasts dramatically with that of the married mother. The married mother has less conflict between meeting her own needs for emotional support and intimacy and meeting her child's needs. Unlike the single mother, the married woman can spend time with her husband and time with her child in the same place without constantly having to choose one over the other.

A second variable which differentially influenced parenting variables in the two groups was increased household help. For married mothers, but not for single mothers, household help was associated with increased control, better communication, more nurturance, and more child compliance. Spending more time at home, the married woman may feel less justified in neglecting household chores. The married woman may need to consider the importance of homemaking activities not just for herself, but also for her husband. In contrast, the busy single mother has only her own tolerance to consider. In addition, for married women, some help with household chores may come from their husbands. The correlation of greater household help with more positive mother-child relationships in married women may reflect not just the direct impact of help in freeing them for child care but also the quality of their marital relationships.

The third variable to differentially predict parenting variables was hours of employment. Increased hours of employment related to increased controls and maturity demands among the single mothers, but decreased controls and demands for married mothers. Possibly married women, in a more traditional living arrangement, more readily accept the traditional notions of the role of women as being Mother and Homemaker, not Worker. Although working less than

their single counterparts, it may be that married women still feel some guilt about the hours they work, an as a result are more cautious about the demands and controls they place on their children. In contrast, single parents may feel justified in placing higher demands on their children and exercising more control because they must work.

The finding that an increased workload among single parents is related to more control and higher maturity demands tends to support Weiss' contention that single parents place more responsibility on their children than do married mothers. In addition, these findings concur with Eiduson's findings (1981) that single mothers are more controlling of their children than parents in other types of traditional and alternative living arrangements. Given their busy schedules, single mothers may need to exercise more control over their children's behavior and may need their children to behave more maturely in order that they may sucessfully handle the many demands placed upon them. As one of our single mothers reported, "When I'm rushing off to work in the morning, I can't afford to let my son dawdle in tying his shoes. I have to rush and push him along in order to get him to the daycare and me to work on time."

Conclusions and Implications

Our results indicate significant differences in the lives of single and married mothers. Single mothers experience greater stresses from more numerous life changes and longer work hours than married mothers; simultaneously they receive substantially less support from their social network, especially in their roles as a parent. Their lives appear more segmented, with a greater separation in their roles as mother, worker and woman—than do the lives of most married mothers.

The parental effectiveness of both single and married mothers is enhanced by the availability of support and reduced by increases in stress.

While the effects of stresses and supports have similar effects on parenting, social contacts, the extent of help with household chores, and hours of employment had differential effects on parenting attitudes and behavior in these two groups of women.

Despite the increased pressures and reduced supports available to single mothers, the single mothers in our study performed similarly to the married mothers in their ability to handle their children. Given the age, educational and financial level of many of our single and married mothers, our sample may be considered an unusual selection. Our findings nevertheless suggest that with an adequate financial position, and with maturity, vocational competence and personal resourcefulness, single parents may be as successful in parenting as married parents, at least during the child's preschool years.

What is perhaps most impressive about our results, and about the single parents themselves, is their ability to cope as well as married women, with substantially less supports and more pressures and changes in their lives. Nevertheless, despite their courage, dedication, sense of humor and very hard work, a number of our single parents have asked for additional supports especially in the areas of parenting. Although organizations exist which can offer single parents opportunities for social interactions in the company of their children, many of the single parents in our sample were reluctant to participate in these organizations because they had neither the time nor money to participate and because they felt that many of these organizations included divorced parents with older children. More effective interventions with single parents should be directed at offering telephone networks or informal social activities focusing on offering these mothers opportunities to share their experiences as parents with other single mothers.

Footnotes

1. In two single parent families the father had lived at home with the child. In one case, a girl, the father was at home for only one month, and in the other case, a boy, the father was at home for the first 15 months. In this latter case, the child was seen in our study at four and a half years of age, so that he had lived in a single parent household for the last three years of his life.

2. After distributing several questionnaires, it was noted that several married mothers had not included their spouses among the four people listed. Because of the potential ambiguity in the wording of the form, instructions were then changed so that married mothers were asked to include their "mates" among the four people listed.

3. One married subject was extreme among all the subjects in the amount of emotional and marital turmoil she was experiencing at the time of the study. Her turmoil was such that she only sent in her completed questionnaires under enormous encouragement. Excluding this woman and her match from the matched t-test results in a significant difference in social event scores at the .03 level.

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Table 1

Mean Mother-Child Interaction Scores For Single and Married Mothers

		Single Mothers	Married Mothers	t-value difference
Maternal Control	M	17.79	18.93	-.53
	s.d.	5.41	5.53	
Maturity Demands	M	7.50	9.43	-1.7[1]
	s.d.	3.18	2.90	
Mother-child Communication	M	11.64	11.21	.39
	s.d.	2.56	2.99	
Maternal Nurturance	M	18.29	17.29	.59
	s.d.	4.84	4.30	
Child's Compliance With Maternal Demands	M	12.39	12.21	.05
	s.d.	4.86	4.87	

[1] $p \leq .10$

Table 2

Differences in Social Network Variables, Coping Abilities and Life Changes between Single and Married Mothers

Variable		Single	Married	t-value[a,b]
Social Network				
Social contacts	M	75.64	115.50	-1.38[1]
	s.d.	56.00	65.64	
Extent confide in friends/relatives	M	1.64	2.43	-1.81*
	s.d.	1.08	1.0	
Emotional supports friends/relatives	M	53.52	61.00	-1.70[1]
	s.d.	11.88	10.49	
Emotional supports from groups	M	2.93	4.35	-2.05*
	s.d.	1.44	2.47	
Total Emotional Support	M	66.3	82.59	-3.47**
	s.d.	12.83	18.49	
Satisfaction with Emotional Support	M	3.79	3.59	.64
	s.d.	.80	1.01	
Value parenting beliefs of social contacts	M	25.79	32.57	-1.79*
	s.d.	6.66	7.36	
Parent support from groups	M	2.93	4.71	-2.87**
	s.d.	1.39	2.34	
Total parent support	M	32.30	42.62	-2.95**
	s.d.	7.01	10.21	
Satisfaction with parental support	M	3.64	4.21	-1.96*
	s.d.	1.08	.58	

Table 2 (cont'd)

Differences in Social Network Variables, Life Changes (Stress) and Coping Abilities between Single and Married Mothers

Variable		Single	Married	t-value[a,b]
Help with House	M	5.64	6.14	-.14
	s.d.	10.25	5.07	
Help with Childcare	M	42.79	22.86	4.63**
	s.d.	8.96	13.83	
Emergency help household	M	9.93	9.93	0
	s.d.	3.93	3.77	
Emergency help childcare	M	12.57	10.71	1.28
	s.d.	1.65	4.51	
Number of Kin	M	1.64	1.57	.15
	s.d.	1.28	1.02	
Coping				
Household	M	3.57	4.00	-1.88*
	s.d.	1.15	.78	
Childcare	M	4.42	4.71	-1.07
	s.d.	.65	.47	
Finances	M	3.71	4.14	- .86
	s.d.	1.33	1.10	
Emotional	M	4.00	4.28	-1.17
	s.d.	.96	.73	
Overall	M	4.29	4.43	- .43
	s.d.	.91	.94	
Changes in Life Events (Stress)	M	9.36	6.65	1.69[1]
	s.d.	5.61	4.27	

Table 2 (cont'd)

Differences in Social Network Variables, Life Changes (Stress) and Coping Abilities between Single and Married Mothers

Variable		Single	Married	t-value[a,b]
Employment				
Hours Worked	M	34.14	16.50	4.01**
	s.d.	10.28	13.93	

a = degrees of freedom = 13
b = one-tailed probability
† $p < .10$
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

Table 3
Correlations between Mother-child Interaction Variables and Social Network and Life Circumstance Variables in Single and Two-Parent Families

Mother-child Interaction Measures	Maternal Control		Maturity Demands		Mother-child Communication		Maternal Nurturance		Child's Compliance	
Mother's Social Network and Life Circumstances	Single	Two Parent	Single	Two Parent	Single	Two Parent	Single	Two Parent	Single	Two Parent
Total Social Contacts	-.40[1]	.10	-.27	.17	-.37[1]	.21	-.61**	.33[a]	-.61**	.14[a]
Total Emotional Support	.08	.34	-.03	-.04	-.23	.34	.02	.35	.00	.45[1]
Satisfaction With Emotional Support	-.21	.49*[b]	-.20	.43[1b]	.11	.69**[b]	.23	.45[1]	-.04	.42[1]
Total Parenting Support	.54*	.22	.47*	-.02	.32	.37[1]	.37[1]	.55*	.59*	.37[1]
Satisfaction with Parenting Support	-.11	.20	-.19	.03	.62**	.28	.64**	.37[1]	.14	.26
Household Help	-.30	.54*[a]	-.19	.37[1]	-.13	.58*[b]	-.19	.58*[a]	-.42[1]	.53*[a]
Childcare Help	.28	-.29	.21	-.18	-.13	.001	-.07	.36	.34	-.08
Stress	.07	-.02	.20	-.02	-.42[1]	-.26	-.49*	-.42[1]	-.15	-.11
Hours Worked	.52*	-.49*[a]	.48*	-.42[1a]	.17	-.31	.09	-.02	.50*	-.33[a]

[1] $p \leq .10$
* $p \leq .05$
** $p \leq .01$
[a] indicates correlations are different at the .05 level of significance
[b] indicates correlations are different at the .10 level of significance